

Serial vs. Consecutive Verbs in Walapai

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Serial verbs are rare in North American Indian languages. Apparently, serial verbs only occur in the Yuman family of languages, located in Arizona, California, and Mexico. Walapai or Hulapai is an Upland Yuman language located on the south side of the horseshoe of the Grand Canyon in Northwest Arizona.

Walapai often has several verbs in a sentence which have the same subject. In many cases, these verbs look very much like the serial verb constructions that are so well known from West Africa; but in others, they seem just to be consecutive actions or events. One must ask whether there is any real difference between serial verbs and consecutive verbs in Walapai.

The best known serial verbs in Walapai are the comparatives and superlatives. However, not all comparatives and superlatives in Walapai are serial verbs; they may be compound verb stems. (In the analyses below, "SS" means "same subject as following verb", "DS" means "different subject from following verb", and "TNS." means a kind of "universal aorist that may refer to past, present or futurc".) ("SUB." refers to "subordination". See note on last page.)

há-č hmí-k-yu #
3/NOM. be=tall/SS/be

'He is tall.'

há-č hmí-k ná pi-kwíl-k-we #
3/NOM. be=tall/SS 1 SUB./pass/SS/do

'He is taller than I am.'

hmí-k páy kwíl-k-we #
be=tall/SS all pass/SS/do

'He is the tallest (of all).'

má-č vikák ma-homí-k ná im-kwíl-a mi-táop #
2/NOM. not=at=all 2/be=tall/SS 1 2/pass/TNS. 2/be,do=not

'You are not as tall as I am.' (or) 'You are not taller than I am.'

má-č yâmkpèr-a mi-táv-k ná mi-kwíl-k-a #
2/NOM. be=intoxicated/TNS. 2/be=much,very/SS 1 2/pass/SS/TNS.

'You are a lot drunker than I am.'

These comparatives and superlatives have a stative verb followed by a verb meaning '(sur)pass', or 'exceed'. Only the second verb has an object. Thus, these look exactly like the so-called classical serial verbs of West Africa. However, these conditions do not apply to all serial verbs in Walapai.

pá-č̣ a-hmí-táv-yu #
1/NOM. 1/be=tall/be=very,much/be

'I am rather tall.' (or) 'I am taller than most/all.'

pá-č̣ hmí-táv-k pá n-kwíl-we #
1/NOM. be=tall/be=very,much/SS 3 SUB./pass/do

'I am much taller than they are.' (or) 'I am the tallest by far.'

/táv/, 'be/do very much so', is a very common verb, both as an independent verb and as one element of a compound stem. It occurs much more frequently than /kwíl/, 'surpass', 'exceed'. /táv/ also frequently compounds with noun stems. However, since any stem can occur as either a noun or a verb, stems must be seen in context before the word class can be determined.

When Joseph Greenberg was giving the first public presentation of his new classification of American Indian languages at the 1978 Mid-America Linguistics Conference at the University of Oklahoma, Norman, he made an aside remark that never appeared in print that the only serial verbs in North American Indian languages, so far as he knew, were the comparative constructions in Yuman languages. However, Walapai has many other serial verb constructions. Datives are marked with the second verb /é/, 'give', again very similar to dative constructions in West Africa, e.g. Twi or Akan /má/, 'give', which is used as the second verb in a series to mark datives.

qóθ n-ma-wilwí-v-a-k kwáθtí-l mi-č̣á-k mi-é #
coffee SUB./2/make,be=half/STATE/TNS./SS dish,cup/in 2/pour/SS 2-give

'Give me a half cup of coffee.'

pá-č̣ pá-lwá-há kándl-mâ-v-yâ-m kwé è-kakáv-ik
1/NOM. 1/wife/that candy/eat/STATE/this/DS thing 1/buy/SS

è-é-hì-k-we #
1/give/FUT./SS/do

'I am going to buy my wife a present for Christmas.'

máp-qéč̣ wàksí n-máy é-m θí-k-we #
youth/small cow SUB./milk give/DS drink/SS/do

'I am giving the baby milk to drink.'

pá-č̣ wàksí n-máy-a ì-yó-k pá-č̣ít-a è-é-k-we #
1/NOM. cow SUB./milk/DEF. 1/take/SS 1/mother/DEF. 1/give/SS/do

'I took my mother the/some milk.'

In the first sentence just above, there are three verbs in the series. It is a bit difficult to determine which object is the object of which verb. In fact, it is also a bit difficult to say whether there is a sequence of actions between the first two verbs or whether they are simultaneous. It would seem that the 'pouring' and the 'filling half full' ought to be done at exactly the same time. This type of close association or inseparability is a common feature of many serial verbs. Likewise, /é/, 'give', expresses a

dative or indirect-object relationship. The only overt mark of the first-person is the /p-/ prefix on /vilwí/, which means 'be or do half or in the middle'. (This is only one of the uses of the subordinating /p-/. Here it means 'second-person subject and first-person object'.) In the second sentence above, it would seem that there is no need for the verb /é/, 'give', from an English point of view; but /é/ is required in Walapai. /kakáv/, 'buy', has two expressed objects. No doubt /é/ also has two objects, since third-person pronoun objects are usually zero. If the situation is not clear, /pá/, 'person', 'people', will be used as a third-person object.

In the third sentence above, /máŋqéč/, 'baby', is not the subject. The /č/ is part of the stem, and not a nominative case suffix. Since /máŋqéč/ has a zero case suffix, it is an object. Likewise, since /é/ has the ablative-different-subject suffix, 'I' cannot be the subject of /é/. No doubt one occurrence of /máŋqéč/ has been deleted, just as one occurrence of 'baby' has been deleted in the English translation. Likewise, one could ask why the meaning of the next sentence is not 'I took some milk and gave it to my mother.' It could be, but 'I took my mother some milk.' would also require /é/. This raises the question of whether serial verbs in Walapai are any different from consecutive verbs, i.e. verbs that follow in chronological order. Since all verbs and all clauses must occur in chronological order, the answer could be 'no'. However, a second or serial verb such as /é/ is required in many constructions where English would not require a second verb. See just below for more examples and discussion of this point.

ŋā-č kwā-h yó-k wāksí ĭ-či-kyát-ak-a #
 1/NOM. knife/that take,get/SS cow,beef 1/CAUS./cut/SS/TNS.

'I got a knife to cut the meat (with).'

kwā yó-k wāksí či-kyát-k-we #
 knife take,get/SS cow,beef CAUS./cut/SS/do

'He got the knife and cut the meat.'

The first sentence above shows purpose. It says nothing about whether any meat has been cut. Thus, it is marked by the aorist /-a/ suffix on the verb, which has no real time referent. The sentence could just as well have been translated, 'He has gotten a knife to cut meat (with).' The second sentence with /-we/, 'do', suffixed is as close as Walapai has to a transitive mark on the verb. (The Walapai verb system is in flux. It is changing over from a system in which /-we/, 'do', marked 'current event or happening' and /-yu/, 'be', marked 'habitual or often-occurring event or happening' to a system in which the younger Walapai use /-we/ to mark transitive and /-yu/ to mark intransitive. The two sentences above are from an elderly speaker.) The /-we/ suffix indicates that the speaker knows that the event took place; and, therefore, he did cut the meat with a knife. Thus, the second sentence is two consecutive verbs and actions; but the first sentence is two serial verbs. Could the second sentence mean, 'He got the knife to cut the meat (with).'? It could, but the emphasis would be on the getting of the knife; whereas, the first sentence focuses on the purpose, i.e. getting and using the knife for the purpose of the knife for cutting meat.

kák marát-a má-k è-év-a-taóp-m-iú-č-yu #
not prickly=pear/DEF. eat/SS 1-hear,perceive/TNS./be,do=not/HAB./
Pl.=ACTION/be

'I have never eaten prickly pear fruit before.'

pá-č vikak kwěcatí-ya ú-k év-a-taóp #
1/NOM. not=at=all ghost,spirit/DEF. see/SS hear,perceive/TNS./
be,do not

'I have never seen a ghost.'

The verb /év/, 'hear', 'feel', 'perceive', 'experience', is used as the second of two serial verbs express feelings or experience, especially in the negative. In the first sentence, the speaker has never had the experience of eating prickly pear fruit before and has either just eaten his first piece or is about to eat his first piece. Since the last verb in the second sentence has no indicative suffix, it is a general statement about reality. One is stating that since he has never seen a ghost, he doubts the reality of their existence. In both cases, however, the second serial verb is required.

/év/ can also mean, 'listen (to)', 'obey', and can express an opinion such as 'perceive', 'find', 'judge'.

pâ mórâ-č à-smâ-taóp-t-m kwè kanáv-m év-yu #
1 FaMo/NOM. 1/sleep/be,do not/IMPERF./DS thing tell/DS hear/be

'Grandmother told me a story before I went to sleep.'

páp-a sít-θ-im kák té-m è-év-a-taóp #
potato/DEF. be=one/only/DS not be,do=much/DS 1-find,judge/TNS./
be,do=not

'One potato is not enough (for me).'

pá-č qóm θâ-č pá-k-a-k
1/NOM. coffee that/NOM. come,boil=up,out/at,near/TNS./SS

sáh-a-m è-év-ik-yu #
give=off=odor/TNS./DS 1/perceive/SS/be

'I can smell the coffee boiling.'

kwè à-hví-k è-év-a-m sáh-a-k-i #
thing 1/perceive=odor 1/perceive/TNS./DS give=off=odor/TNS./SS/say

'I smell something rotten.'

Since clauses must come in chronological order in Walapai, the only way to express "before" is to have a negative clause in the imperfect which describes what happens later. The first sentence does not mean, 'I did not go to sleep, and grandmother told me a story.' Perhaps a better literal translation would be, 'Grandmother, while I was not sleeping, told me a story.' The meaning is that I did go to sleep, but after grandmother told me a story.

The second sentence above means something like, 'Based on my previous experience, I judge that just one potato is not sufficient for me.' Again, since there is no indicative suffix on the last verb, this is a statement of general truth and not a statement of something that is or was happening. It is a statement of judgment based on perception.

The third sentence above is something like, 'I perceive that the coffee is boiling and giving off an odor or smell.' Notice that the "subordinate" clause is embedded in the "main" clause. Because of the necessity of the chronological order of verbs in Walapai, the verbs expressing the boiling and giving off an odor have to precede the verb of perception. In the last sentence above, the meaning is something like, 'I am sniffing the air and am perceiving that something is giving off a stink.' /hwí/, 'smell', 'sniff the air', is onomatopoeic. Also, the suffixed auxiliary verb /-i/, 'say', and also 'judge', 'perceive', indicates that the speaker is or has been evaluating the situation and rendering a judgment about what the situation is. Consequently, the sniffing of the air precedes the perception and the evaluation. One could of course say that these events are occurring at the same time. Serial verbs are often used to express things happening at the same time or nearly so.

wíhhâkânpáč-a kowá-m yám-ay-yu #
Flagstaff, Snow=Peak/DEF. lead, drive/DS go, leave/FUT. /be

'I am driving to Flagstaff.'

hát-a-č viyám wé yám #
dog/DEF./NOM. run away, off go, leave

'The dog ran away.'

The first sentence above could be something like, 'I am going to Flagstaff by driving.' The two actions are simultaneous and thus expressed by serial verbs. In the second sentence, the dog's disappearance was not witnessed by the speaker, and thus no indicative suffix occurs on the verb. The speaker is commenting on the fact that the dog is missing and assumes that it ran off or heard that the dog ran off. Again, two simultaneous actions are expressed by serial verbs.

piθá-č yév-m yú-sám-ł yó-v pi-é #
3/NOM. self/with eye/cover/INSTRU. make, do/STATE. SUB./give

'He made the glasses for me.'

piqí-hâ quptó-h à-yó-k pés-a é-k-we #
woman/that basket-that l/take/SS money/DEF. give/SS/do

'I paid the woman for her basket.'

Just what does "simultaneous" mean? Is "benefactive" simultaneous? The /yévm/ in the first sentence above means 'with me in mind', 'according to my specifications'. Thus, the sentence is not merely, 'He made and gave the glasses to me.' But, it is clearly benefactive, i.e. 'He made the glasses according to my needs/specific requirements.' At the same time he made the lenses, he made my prescription.

In the second sentence above, 'I took the woman's basket and gave her the money.', 'her' is a zero object of /é/. This is of course a meaning of the sentence; but because there are three arguments in the predicate, English has to use a preposition like 'for' and Walapai has to use a serial verb like /é/.

tipúr-a è-é-m sír-a-k-we #
writing 1/give/DS read,count/TNS./SS/do

'I made/had him read the letter.'

pés-a é-m-a-m níθá-č wám-k-u-n #
money/DEF. give/ABL./TNS./DS 3/NOM. carry,take/SS/be/PERF.

'I sent him some money.'

The verb /é/, 'give yes/consent/orders' is no doubt the same verb as /é/, 'give'. It often means causative. The first sentence above does not mean just 'I gave him the letter to read.' It means, 'I made/caused him (to) read the letter.' The second sentence above is, 'I gave (him) the money, and he took (it) (to him).', i.e. 'I gave someone orders to do something for/on behalf of another.' Thus, in some cases, consecutive verbs look just like serial verbs. However, the meaning of this last sentence is not just two consecutive events. It is clearly causative and benefactive.

hmár-a hwák-a-k ním pém-k-yu #
boy/DEF. be=two/TNS./SS then go,leave=dual/SS/be

'Two boys were/are going by.'

ná-č a-hwák-at-a-k awá sít-θ-al
1/NOM. 1/be=two/IMPERF./TNS./SS house be=one/only/DEF./in

ĩ-pi-wé-v-ič-ik-yu #
1/SUB./live,dwell/STATE./PL.=AGENT/SS/be

'We are both living in the same house.'

Partitives are serial verbs also. Numbers are verbs and often are used as the first verb in a serial-verb construction. (Motion verbs usually have a suppletive dual stem, e.g. /yám/, 'go', 'leave', has /pém/ in the dual.) In the second sentence above, /hwák/, 'be two', even takes the imperfect suffix. Probably the best translations of /hwák/ used as a partitive is 'both'.

hmál-a lél satá-k-we #
bag/DEF. tear,rip open/SS/do

'I tore the bag open.'

tú tãrhár-a-k ĩ-yapá-m-ay-yu #
very work=for=wages/TNS./SS 1/be=dark,night/HAB./FUT./be

'I am going to keep working until it gets dark.'

It could be argued that the first sentence above could be, 'I tore the bag

and opened it.' However, it seems obvious that the tearing and opening were simultaneous, a common meaning of serial-verb constructions. In the second sentence, the use of serial verbs with the future on the second verb is the usual way of expressing 'until'. It is clear that 'I' is the subject of both verbs since /yapá/ has the first-person subject prefix. 'I will be/get darkened.', 'doesn't mean, 'Night will fall.', in English; but one could use a paraphrase like, 'Night will catch/fall on me.'

kwè θí-č sawál-k-yu #
thing drink/PL.=ACTION like,love/SS/be

'He likes to drink/drinks a lot.' 'He is a drunk.'

piθá kwè kcí-č-v-i swál-k-a #
3 thing steal,rob/PL.=ACTION/STATE/say like,love/SS/TNS.

'He has the habit of stealing.' 'He is a thief.'

má-č kwáw ma-sawál-iŋ-yu #
2/NOM. talk,speak 2/like,love/2=SS/be

'You talk a lot/too much.' 'You have logorrhea.'

Excess habitual activity is expressed by a verb naming the activity and /sawál/, 'like', 'love', 'be excessively habituated to', as the second serial verb. For example, the first sentence above means that the subject is a real, confirmed drunk. (/ŋ/ is a contraction of /mk/.)

miyál má-k čáv-we #
bread eat/SS consume/do

'I ate up the bread.' 'I ate all the bread.'

To express completion like English 'up', /čáv/, 'consume', is used. I have seen /čáv/ only with /má/, 'eat', and /θí/, 'drink', but it may well have wider distribution.

It would seem therefore that in Walapai serial verbs are used to indicate closely related and simultaneous states and activities. In some cases, serial verbs will look very similar to consecutive verbs; however, there is usually a morphological difference between serial and consecutive verbs, and there will be a difference of focus between them.

Walapai is unfortunately a dying language. Since 1959, I have witnessed some rather drastic changes in the structure of Walapai. Formerly, /p-/ as a noun prefix meant 'possessed noun'. It now means 'third-person possessor' on nouns. As a verb prefix, /p-/ indicates a number of subordinating relationships, such as second-person subject and first-person object. It can also be an adverbial object or temporal marker like 'there' and 'when'. As a particle prefix, /p-/ is an intensive marker like 'this very one'.